

## **The United States and the Second Round of NATO Enlargement**

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### **Key Insights:**

- U.S.-European divisions remain significant and may be growing even as NATO enlarges.
- There are significant concerns about the military readiness of both new members and applicants.
- Experts do not agree that Russia is seriously interested in a partnership with NATO and whether NATO should offer Moscow the terms it seeks.
- The second round of NATO enlargement will not arouse the same opposition as the first, but congressional acceptance is by no means certain.

At its November 2002 conference in Prague, NATO is scheduled to invite its chosen recipients to a second round of enlargement of its membership. At the same time, NATO is devising a new mechanism of partnership with Russia in the wake of collaboration since September 11, 2001, in the war on terrorism. Moreover, the alliance is itself undergoing a great debate surrounding the nature of the relationship between the United States and its European allies and the need for military transformation of Europe to keep pace with American military prowess.

These three issues constantly interact in any discussion of NATO's future prospects and were the main subjects of discussion at a conference sponsored jointly by the Institute of East Central Europe and the Institute of War and Peace at Columbia University and the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College held at Columbia on February 21-22, 2002. This conference brought together governmental personnel from the United States and Europe, as well as experts, scholars, and foreign correspondents, all of whom ranged over these questions in their presentations and discussions.

Owing to the gap in military capability between Europe and the United States and the even greater gap between NATO's new members and prospective members with both Europe and the United States, a great deal of time was devoted to their readiness to adapt to NATO's military standards. These standards entail both a democratic structure of civilian control over the military and reforms tailored to the goal of enhancing their ability to cooperate and collaborate in the field with NATO forces at a NATO standard. While it is universally acknowledged that invitation to potential new members and actual conferral of membership are essentially political decisions, the experience of the new members has been a checkered one that in several cases has left something to be desired. For example, the Czech Republic's reaction to and participation in the Kosovo operations betrayed endless vacillations, and some current trends in Hungarian politics relating to the Hungarian diaspora in Romania, Slovakia, and Serbia are worrisome. Therefore,

concerns exist that new members will fail to live up to the requirements of alliance solidarity in the political sense or to the operational and military requirements of interoperability with NATO. At the same time, American civilian and retired military experts who have worked with these countries' armed forces gave detailed descriptions of the seriousness with which we take these issues, and speakers from those states supported this line of argument by indicating how they are endeavoring to make progress towards satisfying NATO's criteria for membership.

Similarly, many speakers addressed the relationship among the older allies which is also seriously and adversely affected by the gap between them and America's military capabilities, a gap which has profound strategic and political repercussions as well. Here again, it is accepted that there must be a resolution of the issues of unilateralism vs. multilateralism, the systematic modernization of European defense capabilities, renewed attention to the formulation of shared threat assessments, and action to prevent an invidious operational "division of labor" between the United States and its continental allies. The visible gap in outlook among the allies colors their relationship to every security challenge that NATO faces and will face in the future, including enlargement, partnership with Ukraine and Russia, and the extent to which the United States will play an active role in Europe, and the Europeans will act robustly in so-called out-of-area contingencies.

With regard to partnership with Russia, a debate occurred between speakers who adopted an optimistic, if cautious, approach, stating that opportunities for an unprecedented and real partnership with Moscow were emerging, and those who argued that, in fact, the opportunities for genuine partnership were much more circumscribed than the other side might believe. Obviously this debate ranges over Russia's security objectives in Eurasia, not just Europe, and its readiness to comply with NATO's standards of action when confronting either political or military security challenges, if not actual threats. But it also comprises the question of Russia's military and operational readiness to enter into mutual collaboration in the field with NATO beyond peacekeeping and the entire structure of civilian and democratic military control in Russia. These issues must be confronted in any attempt to forge a partnership with Russia, and even optimistic analyses remain cautious as to the degree that the Russian state, as opposed to President Putin personally, is eager for such partnership. Similarly, considerable concern exists in Central and Eastern Europe that Russia may have adopted new tactics to weaken the region's pro-Western attachment. In other words, the regional perception is that Moscow's goals have not changed, but its tactics have changed to meet the present situation and power realities in the region.

The suspicion of Russia voiced in many quarters also applies when one looks at Ukraine's future relationship with NATO. Ukraine has many troubles, largely internal in nature, and it is always mindful, as well, of Russia's opposition to NATO enlargement or to Ukraine's independence. Given Russia's proprietary attitude towards the CIS and Ukraine's internal divisions and weaknesses, it will be a very long time before Ukraine can aspire to a deep-running partnership with NATO, let alone membership. Unfortunately,

in this regard, Ukraine trails behind Russia even though its importance to European security in the future is critical.

While there are scholars who oppose enlargement, and who spoke at the conference, it is clear that the political leadership in Central and Eastern Europe regards it favorably and enthusiastically along with future membership for their states in the EU. Membership in those organizations is crucial to these countries' security and future development as well as to the political fortunes of pro-Western factions and elites in those states. In addition, none of the pessimistic forecasts raised by critics concerning the first round of enlargement in 1997-99 have come to pass; quite the opposite. Finally, there is unanimity in the Alliance that enlargement will take place, and apparently that Washington can and should define the criteria for membership as well as name the specific states who will be invited. After September 11 and the opportunity for partnership with Russia, it is also clear that some, if not much, of the steam has gone out of Russian opposition to enlargement. Therefore, the opposition here to the process of enlargement also seems to have waned, even if it still exists among many academic specialists.

Nevertheless, it also remains true that the Alliance must grapple with very serious issues in the future beyond simply deciding whom to invite as new members. The issues of its relationship to the EU, a new definition of NATO roles and missions, the question of allied interoperability, partnership with Russia and the overall need to define NATO's relationship to out-of-area operations beyond the Alliance's borders are all vital issues whose importance to NATO is growing and must therefore be addressed sooner rather than later. If nothing else, this conference underlined the urgent need for that discussion and justified, thereby, the importance of open debate on future challenges that will confront NATO and its members.

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